

**Northern Illinois University**

**OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSPERSON**

**ANNUAL REPORT**

**May 16, 2012—May 15, 2013**

**Sarah Klaper, J.D.  
University Ombudsperson**

### **Acknowledgments**

The Office of the Ombudsperson experienced a “year of transition” in 2012-13, and several people have been essential in that transition. First and foremost, Ms. Karola Smith has lent her considerable knowledge, experience on campus, discretion, honesty, and sense of humor to the continuing success of this office. Ms. Smith is not only the calming presence at the front desk fielding calls and intakes, she has also been a force of organization and reorganization to make the entire office best able to work efficiently and effectively with the campus community. I feel incredibly fortunate that I work with Ms. Smith and that she is here to make this Office “go.”

In 2012-13, the Office was lucky to work with two outstanding graduate assistants, Matt Bauer and Alyssa Harmon. Matt already had a year of experience in his position, and he was an extremely helpful resource for all of us who were new and orienting to campus. Both he and Alyssa worked directly with undergraduate students throughout the year, performed numerous types of outreach regarding the Office and other campus resources, performed legal research and policy analysis, and acted as back up at the front desk and with administrative tasks as necessary. They were also a great sounding board, providing the student perspective on a variety of policies and procedures, events, and campus happenings. Matt has now graduated from NIU College of Law, passed the Wisconsin Bar Exam, and is in a private legal practice in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We wish him the best. Alyssa is continuing in her third year of law school and has moved on from our office to pursue internships and clinical opportunities that will enhance her future career. Any office in which Alyssa works will be lucky to have her.

We would also like to note how much we appreciate the efforts of Dr. Tim Griffin in making himself available to assist with the transitions within the Office. Dr. Griffin has an unparalleled historical knowledge of NIU, and he has been extremely helpful in sharing that information. Even though he has retired, Dr. Griffin is still an active member of the university community, and his heart is clearly with the best interests of the students and employees of NIU.

Finally, we would like to thank all of the faculty, staff, students, and administrators (including the presidents of each of the councils and the heads of the different presidential commissions), who have welcomed the new members of the Office of the Ombudsperson and offered assistance in a myriad of ways. We truly appreciate your willingness to share information, to allow us to attend your meetings, and to work together to address issues and make NIU a place where we can all live, learn, and work together.

## **The Office of the Ombudsperson**

The Office of the Ombudsperson (Office) is a confidential, neutral, and independent resource for conflict resolution at NIU. The Office serves the entire campus community, including faculty, staff, students, and administrators. As a confidential resource, members of the Office neither disclose who visits the Office, nor the content of conversations. The Office maintains the International Ombudsman Association Standards of Practice ([http://www.ombudsassociation.org/sites/default/files/IOA\\_Standards\\_of\\_Practice\\_Oct09.pdf](http://www.ombudsassociation.org/sites/default/files/IOA_Standards_of_Practice_Oct09.pdf)). As such, the only exceptions to confidentiality are for reports of child abuse and neglect (as required by Illinois law), and instances of an imminent risk of serious physical harm. Pursuant to Article 19 of the Bylaws of NIU the University Ombudsperson is a direct report to the President and is evaluated by the University Council.

The Office consists of the University Ombudsperson, an office administrator, and two graduate assistants. While the University Ombudsperson sees all categories of employees and students at NIU, the graduate assistants spend the majority of their time working with undergraduates, doing outreach, and conducting research. In addition to her administrative duties, the office administrator also assists visitors with research and answering questions related to university policy and procedures. She has also been integral in assessing and improving office procedures, including creating desk manuals for the entire office.

When people ask me, “Yes, but what does that all mean? What does your office DO?” I describe it in this fashion. Individuals come to our office with a mix of fairly simple procedural questions, as well as many complex issues that are all balled-up in a big knot. For the fairly simple procedural questions, we are an information clearinghouse for university policies and procedures. We give direction to those individuals with questions about to whom they should address a concern, what office addresses a particular issue, what university policy applies, or the best ways to approach a situation.

For the individuals with the more-complex issues that resemble a big knot, our services are similarly more complex. First, we actively listen to the concerns at hand. Then, we work to unbind the multiple issues that are knotted together so that they are in manageable pieces and do not appear to be so overwhelming to the individual. We then advise the visitor regarding the university policies that apply to each component of the issue, we work with them to develop strategies regarding the options for dealing with the issue, and offer guidance regarding interpersonal communication to best address those concerns.

When discussing options with visitors to the office, those options are extremely fact-specific, but focus on both the informal options for resolution as well as the formal options for resolution. We always start with informal options. However, if necessary to the situation, we will discuss formal options, both internal to the university, as well as options external to the university. In weighing these options, we will discuss with the visitor the pros and cons of each alternative, or the option of using multiple resources simultaneously.

The Office of the Ombudsperson is also characteristically a practical office. If the visitor is incorrect about a university policy, or if the visitor is out of formal processes to deal with the situation, we honestly assess the situation. I joke that we are really good at giving bad news. However, even in giving that “bad news,” we try to give options to the individual on how to move forward. The visitor leaves the office with an action plan in mind to work toward resolution of the issue, or the next best alternative to resolution.

Even though I formerly practiced law in both Illinois and Ohio, in the position of University Ombudsperson, I am not a practicing attorney, and I do not represent the university or visitors to my office as an attorney. I do not give legal advice. I do not advocate for any individual or group. Instead, I work with visitors to develop strategies so that they can advocate for themselves.

The University Ombudsperson is also tasked with identifying trends in conflict across the university community, and informing administrators and governing bodies regarding those issues. The Ombudsperson does not have decision-making authority within the university system and is not a “reporter” for any other office. However, the Ombudsperson will recommend changes to policies and procedures that can in turn improve the university community. In this way, the Office of the Ombudsperson seeks to reduce incidents of conflict and make the NIU experience successful for everyone who works and attends school here.

### **Notes Regarding This “Year of Transition”**

Consistent with a “year of transition,” the data provided this year is fairly different from that provided by this office in past years. Upon entering my position as University Ombudsperson, I determined that in my first year, I would use the same tracking tools and procedures that currently existed in the office. At the same time, I would assess those tools and rework them when time better permitted in the summer. Therefore, we must acknowledge that while the Office of the Ombudsperson used the same tracking tools as used in previous Annual Reports, the individuals using the tools were different. We defined issues in our own fashion, and we worked with the data tracking system in our own way. We can also anticipate that the 2013-14 Annual Report will again be different from this year’s report as we reshape our data tracking for the office throughout this coming year.

This transition year was also different from years past in that a major focus of the office included learning the organizational structure of NIU; learning NIU, state, and federal policies and procedures; and building relationships with individuals and groups across campus. To that end, I have studied federal laws pertaining to higher education, state laws regarding higher education and state employees, the NIU Constitution and Bylaws, Board of Trustees Policies and Procedures, the APPM, HRS policies and employee handbooks, different union contracts, and the undergraduate and graduate catalogs. I also made a tour of campus, meeting leaders of different offices and units on campus with whom I anticipated I would be working most often. For example, I met with the deans of each of the colleges and the library, the provost, the president, most of the vice presidents, the directors of the resource centers, the directors of different administrative and academic offices across campus, and the NIU Police.

In addition, I have attended and participated in the meetings of each of the presidential commissions, the University Council, the Faculty Senate, the Operating Staff Council, and the SPS Council. I also attend committee meetings regarding workplace issues for operating staff and SPS, as well as the AADR Advisory Committee. Attending all of these meetings has been time consuming; however, it has been extremely helpful in getting to know the campus and its issues. This effort afforded me the ability to integrate quickly into the campus community.

Both my graduate assistants and I have also been extremely active in outreach through presentations and as exhibitors at different campus fairs. We have presented to different college councils, to resource centers, in UNIV 101 & 201 classes, in CAHC 211 instructor classes, to Housing and Dining leadership, to Orientation Leaders classes, at the PanHellenic Association, with Faculty Development, and at programs regarding race relations on campus, to name just a few. We also

exhibited at the Wellness Fair, the International Student Fair, and the Transfer Student Fair in spring semester alone. We exhibited at several other fairs in the fall.

My position at NIU began after the CA, TA, and UNIV orientations and TEI trainings had passed in 2012, and I missed those important outreach opportunities for individuals who work with undergraduate students on a regular basis. That timing issue affected the number of undergraduate students who sought services from our office in 2012-13. For 2013-14, I made sure that I participated in all of the orientations and TEI trainings that were available. I am scheduled to do further programming with Faculty Development and HRS, and to provide programming on conflict resolution with some academic units across campus. These presentations and outreach will assist in getting the word about the Office of the Ombudsperson out to the entire campus community.

## **Trends and Comments**

### **Morale**

#### **“Doubts are more cruel than the worst of truths.” -- Moliere**

The 2012-13 Academic Year was a challenging one for NIU. Numerous vacancies and anticipated vacancies in leadership positions across campus coupled with ongoing state funding issues, nationwide enrollment/retention issues, negative publicity, student tragedies, and the pension debate deeply affected the entire campus community. The effects were not always immediately apparent, and they sometimes displayed in a ripple effect months later. However, the general attitude of faculty, staff, and students notably diminished as the year progressed from a feeling of “I know that we have had some difficulties, but I still love working/going to school here,” to a sense of frustration and hopelessness in many areas.

Toward the end of the academic year, a sense of optimism seemed to be emerging. The trip to the Orange Bowl gave a big bump to morale. In addition, the campus’ reflection and appreciation for the tenure of President Peters, the naming of President Baker, and President Baker’s immediate activity on campus gave some certainty in an uncertain time. Across campus, people noted a renewed sense of direction that eased the burdens of the year a bit. It is hoped that this sense of direction and clarity will continue through the many initiatives apparent across campus directed at the entire campus community.

### **Student Concerns**

Students continued to access the services of the Office of the Ombudsperson in great numbers throughout 2012-13. Many of the concerns students expressed surrounded dissatisfaction with treatment by faculty and staff. In a time of increasing reliance on tuition dollars instead of state support, a focus on collegiality and transparency in process will be important. Giving students an opportunity for an official process for addressing these types of concerns, such as a student grievance process, would also help students feel as though they have been genuinely heard and that their concerns are being taken seriously.

### **Faculty and Staff**

Faculty and staff also noted dissatisfaction with treatment from colleagues, co-workers, and supervisors, including rudeness, intimidation, and discrimination. Mid-career retention issues appearing to relate simultaneously to career satisfaction, financial concerns, supervision issues, and collegiality plagued many departments and divisions. The new focus on expanding existing supervisor training programs will be a good start to addressing faculty and staff concerns. While a

focus on compliance training is definitely important, a larger focus on “soft skills” trainings regarding communication issues would also be equally helpful in preventing many conflicts that we saw in the Office of the Ombudsperson this year. In order to be most effective in retaining talented faculty and staff, individuals need to have a voice, have an opportunity to be heard, have their input valued (even if not accepted as an appropriate course of action for the issue at hand), and feel that they are respected and valued members of a team.

## **Data Tables**

When interpreting the data displayed throughout the following pages, it is crucial to keep the following points in mind in order to place the data in the proper context.

- These data represent the largely unsubstantiated and uninvestigated allegations of individuals contacting the Office of the Ombudsperson for assistance. They are, at best, honest singular perceptions, not the objective judgments of uninvolved parties.
- The incidents reflected in the data represent concerns presented by individuals who chose to contact our Office for advice and assistance.

Questions or comments regarding this report are welcome and may be directed to the NIU Office of the Ombudsperson.

**Table 1**

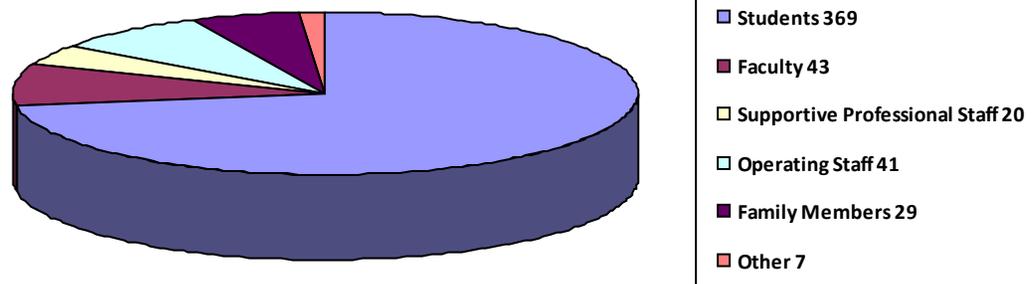
**Status, Gender and Ethnicity of Office Contacts in 2012-13**

<u>Status of Contact</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Not Known</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>African-American</u>	<u>Asian</u>	<u>Caucasian</u>	<u>Latino/a</u>	<u>Other</u>	<u>Not Known</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Undergraduate	138	150	2	<b>290</b>	53	10	115	20	4	88	<b>290</b>
Graduate	32	31	0	<b>63</b>	7	5	27	0	5	19	<b>63</b>
TA/GA	5	3	0	<b>8</b>	1	0	6	1	0	0	<b>8</b>
Student-at-Large	1	0	0	<b>1</b>	0	0	0	0	0	1	<b>1</b>
Former Student/Alum	4	3	0	<b>7</b>	1	1	2	0	0	3	<b>7</b>
Faculty (tenured)	16	17	0	<b>33</b>	0	3	26	2	1	1	<b>33</b>
Faculty (untentured)	2	6	0	<b>8</b>	0	3	5	0	0	0	<b>8</b>
Faculty (temporary)	0	2	0	<b>2</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1	<b>2</b>
Supportive Professionals	4	16	0	<b>20</b>	3	1	10	4	0	2	<b>20</b>
Operating Staff	16	25	0	<b>41</b>	2	1	29	3	2	4	<b>41</b>
Family Members	5	24	0	<b>29</b>	2	2	11	0	0	14	<b>29</b>
Other/Unknown	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>7</u>
	<b>226</b>	<b>281</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>509</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>*136</b>	<b>509</b>

Policy Development Cases 10  
Total **519**

Simple Referrals to Other Offices 173  
Total Contacts and Referrals **\*\* 692**

Visits to Ombudsperson Website **250**



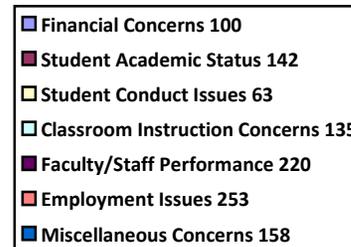
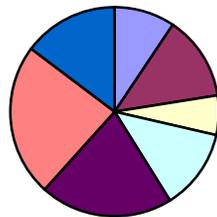
\* unable to determine via phone or email communications

\*\*does not include participants in workshops, presentations by members of the Office staff, or consultations with external entities

**Table 2**

**All Issues (Primary and Secondary) Presented in 2012-13 Sorted by Constituency\***

<b><u>Types of Concerns</u></b>	<b><u>Students</u></b>	<b><u>Faculty</u></b>	<b><u>Supportive Professional Staff</u></b>	<b><u>Operating Staff</u></b>	<b><u>Family</u></b>	<b><u>Policy</u></b>	<b><u>Other</u></b>
Financial Concerns	88	0	0	3	8	0	1
Student Academic Status	133	3	0	0	6	0	0
Student Conduct	57	0	2	0	4	0	0
Classroom Instruction	120	5	1	0	9	0	0
Faculty/Staff Performance	143	36	23	13	4	0	1
Employment Issues	55	55	35	107	0	0	1
Miscellaneous Concerns	127	9	4	9	9	0	0



\*These data represent only allegations and should not be interpreted as confirmed incidents.

**Table 3**

**All Issues Presented in 2012-13\***

**Financial Concerns:** emergency funding(4), encumbrances(7), evictions(1), fees(6), financial aid(31), fines(2), insurance(2), leases(5), paycheck(2), refunds(17), scholarship(12), tuition(4), tuition waiver(2), other(1), policy issue(3)

**Academic:** Academic advising(24), academic probation/dismissal(8), add/drop(1), admission(2), certification(3), class permits(2), class scheduling(2), clinical/student teaching course(3), closed classes(2), credit transfer(5), degree/graduation requirements(12), hardship withdrawal(5), incompletes(9), medical withdrawal(4), placement testing(1), program admission(1), program dismissal(2), registration(11), reinstatement(2), repeat courses(17), SAP(3), thesis/dissertation(3), transcripts(6), withdrawals(9), other(2), policy issue(3)

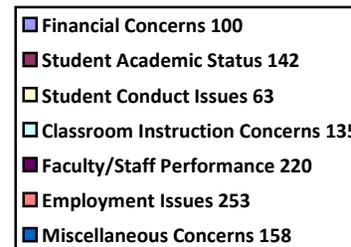
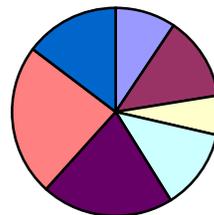
**Student Conduct:** Academic misconduct(3), alcohol(2), assault(2), battery(4), classroom disruption(1), deceitfulness(4), discrimination(4), due process(3), harassment(3), intimidation(2), judicial system(9), residence hall misconduct(2), roommate disputes(7), sanctions(10), sexual harassment(1), theft(2), other(3), policy issue(1)

**Classroom Instruction:** Attendance(10), course syllabus(15), discriminatory grading(7), faculty absences(3), faculty office hours(1), final exams(3), grade appeals(32), grade change(9), grading standards(13), make-up work(13), personality conflicts(7), quality of instruction(13), tutoring(4), other(3), policy issue(2)

**Faculty/Staff Performance:** Deceitfulness(18), derogatory comments(20), discrimination(11), favoritism(12), harassment(9), inaccurate advising(15), inattentiveness(30), incompetence(14), intimidation(17), retaliation(12), retention of tests/papers(6), rudeness(19), sexual harassment(1), unprofessionalism(33), other(2)

**Employment:** Academic freedom(3), disciplinary action(10), discrimination(15), grievance(23), harassment(9), hearing(2), hiring process(5), inadequate staffing(3), job classification(5), job description(9), job duties(27), morale(17), payroll(1), performance evaluation(14), personality conflicts(15), poor supervisory skills(15), promotion(6), salary/benefits(9), separation(2), sexual harassment(2), student employment(8), supervisor/employee relations(14), suspension(2), tenure(3), termination(5), transfer(2), union(3), work schedule(2), working atmosphere(1), working conditions(8), work load(9), policy issue(4)

**Miscellaneous:** Athletics(1), career advising(7), commencement(2), disability accommodations(9), ethical considerations(8), FERPA(1), health concerns(26), immigration issues(2), interpersonal problems(7), legal issues(25), off-campus housing(10), off-campus problems(16), on-campus housing(14), parking issues(2), privacy issues(8), records retention(2), safety issues(5), transportation(1), other(7), policy issue(5)



\*These data represent only allegations and should not be interpreted as confirmed incidents

## Appendix A

### **Ombudsperson Staff Outreach, Service, and Support Activities of 2012-13 (combined report for Dr. Griffin May/June and Ms. Klaper August – May)**

#### **Presentations by Ombudsperson or Staff**

CHANCE Orientation (7)  
CoB Speaking Engagement  
Graduate School Orientation (2)  
International Student Orientation Panel (1)  
Lincoln Hall Time Management Program  
NAACP Panel (1)  
Pre-Collegiate Bridge Program  
Residence Hall Student Floor Programs (2)  
Student Academic Success Program  
Teaching Assistant Orientation (2)  
UNIV101 and Other Classes (12)  
UNIV101 Instructor Panel (2)

#### **Office Outreach Activities**

Office Open House  
Introductory meetings with President, Provost, Vice Presidents, Vice Provosts, Deans, Associate Deans, Directors, Police Chief, etc.  
Employee Wellness Fair  
Facebook Page and Weekly Tips Message  
Holmes Student Center Window Display (3)  
Housing Programming Fair  
Message on Campus TV and Electronic Message Boards  
University Resources Expo (formerly New Faculty Forum)  
Move-In Day  
New International Students Welcome Fair  
Northern Neighborhood (new student orientation) (21)  
Organizational Expo Pamphlet  
Office Flyers Posted on Campus Bulletin Boards and Buses  
Table Tents in Holmes Student Center Café (2)  
Table Tents in Residence Hall Cafeterias (2)  
Transfer Students Open House (2)  
UNIV101 Instructor Resource Fair

#### **Training Sessions Provided by Ombudsperson**

CAHC211 Instructor Training  
Faculty Development Chair Trainings (2)  
Housing Community Advisors Training  
Northern Star Staff Training  
Orientation Leader Training  
Teaching Assistant Training  
UNIV101 Instructor Training  
UNIV101 Syllabus Workshop

#### **Ombudsperson Service/Committees**

Affirmative Action/Diversity Resources Advisory Committee  
AU ABA Program Advisory Council – Aurora  
CLDEAC - Chicago  
Committee on the Undergraduate Academic Environment  
Faculty Senate  
First-Year Connections Advisory Board  
Operating Staff Council  
Operating Staff Council Workplace Issues Committee  
Presidential Commission on Persons with Disabilities  
Presidential Commission on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity  
Presidential Commission for the Status of Women  
Presidential Commission on the Status of Minorities  
Supportive Professional Staff Council  
Supportive Professional Staff Council Workplace Issues Committee  
University Council  
Planning/Presenting Committee – Summer Academic Ombuds Meeting (DePaul, Chicago)